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To the Editor:

As I was reading the Jan. 27 *Gazette* article about the national search to be conducted for a new MCPS superintendent, my TV across the room was announcing the “unexpected” departure of our neighboring county’s superintendent who apparently hadn’t been able to connect his vision with “results.” A board member was noting his apparent inability “to handle the pressure or workload that comes from the myriad of problems the system has and for which he is ultimately accountable for.”

Then as I returned to the *Gazette* page, my eye fell on the article about the search for a new MCPS leader, and an accompanying Leadership Profile Assessment...and my heart fell. This checklist promised to help the executive search team match candidates to the characteristics of leadership required by the job. But the twenty leadership characteristics listed suggested that they did not seem to really understand the actual nature of the job they were trying to fill. As a CEO, the new MCPS will be held accountable for “all” of those functions [as the PGCS board member above noted.] Which of them are critical to the unique functions of a CEO?

I’d like to share my belief that two of them have prepotence -- “*experience as a teacher*” and “*experience as a manager in a complex organization*”.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that, as a management consultant for both the public and private sectors, I have worked for and with superintendents, as well as with the other key actors in the system -- teachers, principals, and central office staff. As a consequence of that mix of experience, I’d like to share what I’ve learned about the unique scope and nature of the superintendent’s role. And I’ll try to do it by using three more familiar images -- an orchestra conductor, a juggler, and finally, the difference between fathers and uncles.

First, the conductor. A number of school systems have been looking outside of education for their school system CEO’s. A recent comment by management guru Peter Drucker suggests a fundamental flaw in that logic. In discussing the developing understanding of the CEO’s unique role, he noted how the job was like “*running an opera*”--

- You have to fill the hall, if all are to “survive.”
- You also have to deal with “stars,” supporting cast, and orchestra.
- And, more subtly, while you have before you the score of a particular piece that defines certain fundamentals which make it *that* work, you really are writing the opera the audience experiences *while* you are conducting it.

What Drucker did not add, because it seems like such a logical assumption considering the nature of the work, was that the organization would not hire a conductor who had never played an instrument; that is, one whose understanding of the orchestra’s “results” had come only from experiences as a listener to its music.

Obviously, personal experience “making music” contributes a dimension of knowledge that is essential to the CEO’s core responsibility -- enabling a diverse group of musicians to make beautiful music together. This personal understanding of how an individual player’s passion and commitment can concentrate on individual performance and, at the same time, fit as part of a larger whole is essential to the collaboration necessary to produce the organization’s [orchestra’s or school system’s] results.

But it’s not that simple. Managing a total, coordinated system so that it functions both efficiently and effectively requires skills and understanding that one doesn’t necessarily get from nurturing children’s learning in a classroom. Here in Montgomery County we also want someone who understands how the *work* of each player in the school system supports that learning. This new leader must be able to coordinate and align all the system’s inside elements in ways that get the job done. And, at the same time, must have the skills to deal with outside pressures so the system can do its work.

But how is that humanly possible? Fortunately, experiences in effective private sector organizations suggest it can, but to understand how requires a different way of looking at the unique nature of the CEO/Superintendent's *work*. Here, the image of the juggler may provide a way to make sense of that situation.

A few years ago, one of our country's leading school reform advocates commented: "... Superintendent's are a 'mystery' to me..." She didn't understand *how* and *why* they do what they do. "In fact," she said, "the whole human support system in schools still is a mystery to me." Somewhere there must be "another plane, which we're not seeing."

At that point, in an attempt to identify that "other plane," a superintendent asked her to visualize superintendents as *jugglers*... keeping a number of balls in the air at all times... and every little while someone keeps adding a new one." "Now," he said, "tell me which one has priority...and if you can't, then tell me what *is* the juggler's priority? Also," he said, "as you watch the juggler, note where his eyes are focused."

In answering his questions, it soon became evident that the first leadership priority of the juggler -- and the superintendent/CEO -- is to keep the overall process going -- moving through time. Keeping all the balls in the air is the nature of the CEO's "work;" and it's highly dependent upon a sense of relationships among the parts in time and space. The juggler is accountable for a system of components whose aim is to survive *as* a connected system. Once it stops it no longer exists.

Sustaining that "system" - as a system - therefore requires someone with an *understanding* of how its parts actually relate, and then *experience* with ways to maintain alignment and relationships among those parts. He/she must know how to provide just enough momentum to keep the system's parts moving together through time. And, at the same time that these internal connections are being created and sustained, this "juggler" must have ways to be constantly aware of factors outside the system that could unbalance it, so that actions can be taken to avoid them.

This responsibility for addressing relationships within and external to the system at the same time is not an easy one, especially when attention to the latter takes time away from the former. But it must be done. And of the 20 or so leadership characteristics, two provide the baseline of experience required to "juggle" effectively the other eighteen. One is direct experience managing classroom interaction with students, the other, direct experience managing the complex interactions with those who must interact with students.

But this only suggests the type of person to be hired. More important [if we take seriously the comment of the neighboring county board member] is what we hold him or her "ultimately accountable for." And here the community plays a key role. For what should Montgomery County's citizens hold the superintendent uniquely accountable?

To answer that I offer a final metaphor for understanding the role the county seeks to fill. It's one that I think any CEO, or parent, might understand.

A year ago, I overheard the CEO of a national organization [who once had been a staff member there] noting how the problems seemed to have changed now that he was CEO. At that point, a woman leaned toward him and said - "Bob, that's the difference between being a *father* and an *uncle*."

A parent, or a CEO, is a "system leader" -- accountable for the sustainability and survival of a whole connected "system," ...not just the improvement of some of it's parts. That's why mothers and fathers frequently disregard advice from aunts and uncles. It doesn't usually take into account what they uniquely know about the connected system they already are living with.

In education similarly, most of the helpful advice for *fixing* the system is from "uncles and aunts" with commitments to changes in particular "parts" of the system, and with little understanding of the interconnections with everything else necessary to sustain them. And typically, when their "help" is rejected or not sufficiently supported because of "other priorities," they blame the CEO/superintendent.

So, my images of MCPS' new superintendent as *conductor*, *juggler*, *parent* suggest that she or he must be held accountable, not for any one initiative or educational approach, but for the ways he/she creates the connections that allow everything being juggled to contribute to making the beautiful music of children *learning*, together.

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